

# CROFT'S ORIGINAL

Forget Angelina Jolie, a housewife from Reading was the first human version of cyber-goddess Lara Croft. By Sally Morgan

**A**s all-action heroine Lara Croft blasts her way into cinemas across the country, there'll be one British girl looking enviously at Hollywood superstar Angelina Jolie.

While the glamorous American actress appears on magazine covers across the globe promoting her role in the movie of the moment, Natalie Cook will be looking after her two-year-old son, Jay, wondering what might have been. For the housewife and model was the original human version of the Tomb Raider cyberbabe.

Four years before Oscar-winner Angelina donned her catuit and gun holder, Natalie was strutting her stuff as the feisty all-action virtual heroine. Back in November 1996, Tomb Raider had just been unleashed on the world. Invented by Toby Gard for the British computer games group, Eidos, its creators launched a national search for a woman who looked just like their computer-generated creation to publicise the little-known game. Out of thousands of applicants, they found Natalie – a 20-year-old model. The leggy, 5ft 10in tall, dark-haired beauty bowled over the computer company with her perfect 24D-24-34 figure and strong personality.

Natalie, whose previous work included catwalk modelling and minor TV roles, was thrilled when she was selected for the £500,000 campaign, receiving £80 an hour for personal appearances – as opposed to Angelina's reported \$4m fee for the film. Dressed in Lara's military style uniform – a pair of tight khaki shorts, Cat boots, Tomb Raider top and a holster with guns – she spent a year touring the country as Croft.

"Lara's the epitome of girl power – very headstrong and takes no nonsense," says Natalie, now 24. "But she's a well-spoken young lady, too – the daughter of the fictitious Lord Haversham-Croft – and went to a posh finishing school. In the computer game, her plane crashes in the Himalayas on her way home from a skiing trip. As the only passenger left alive, she learns how to depend on her wits to survive. She certainly made a change from the usual female 'trophy' in computer games whose only role is to get rescued. In Tomb Raider, she's the one at the centre of the action."

As Lara, Natalie travelled all over Britain, making guest appearances at events and starring in a Tomb Raider TV commercial. "I had to use a real gun for that," she recalls. "An

arms expert trained me to shoot, and I had to fire one in each hand. The power was amazing and the force blasted my hands right back. Everyone ran for cover. Luckily, the bullets were blanks."

What Natalie didn't expect was that life would soon imitate art, as she found herself at the centre of a drama involving armed police.

"After one job as Lara, I had to take my replica pistol home with me. My parents picked me up in their car and we stopped at some traffic lights and dad asked if he could examine the gun. After he dropped me off,

my parents went back to their house. A few minutes later, they heard a loud banging at their front door. When dad opened it, policemen in bullet proof vests stormed in and pushed mum and dad up against the wall.

"Apparently, a bus driver had seen dad examining the gun at the traffic lights and reported him, and his car number plate. They traced dad's address and dashed over. The police thought my parents were terrorists. When dad tried to explain, they didn't believe him – until he insisted on driving them to my place and showed them the replica pistol."

By the time Natalie's 12-month contract ended, Tomb Raider had become the best-selling computer game of all time. Other Laras came and went – including actress Rhona Mitra and Playboy centrefold Neil McAndrew – and, to date, 25 million copies of it and its two sequels have been sold. Meanwhile, Natalie's life couldn't have been more different from

independent, man-free Lara's.

She married her long-term boyfriend Dan, a 34-year-old land consultant, and settled down to a life of domestic bliss in Reading, Berkshire, concentrating on bringing up son Jay.

"Not after the recent launch of the \$100million Tomb Raider movie, Natalie can't help feeling wistful about what might have been.

"Angelina Jolie's a fantastic actress," she says. "She must have had a brilliant time filming in places like Iceland and Cambodia. Lara's supposed to be an upper-class English girl, and sure, Angelina's education lessons have given her the right accent.

"But as the original Lara Croft, I would have jumped at the chance of that role," she admits. "The money would have been a definite bonus, too. Who knows, I might get another opportunity as Lara if they bring out Tomb Raider Two."



ICON: The virtual Lara



TOMBIE: Jolie as Lara

**LARA, LARA LEG:** Natalie recreates her role as the cyberbabe

Picture: EMMA CAPELL

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